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In Other Words

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In Other Words: An essay about language

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In Other Words:
An essay about language
arranged by * and *****

Senget

Sepak

Shiok

Blur

Kaisu

Kena

AngMoPai

'That picture you've just hung up is just... a little senget!' 'Why you so blur?' 'If you do that again I'll give you one big sepak! If you don't listen now, later you kena trouble...' 'This is just shiok!' These words slipped out, skewing a more or less grammatical English sentence, knocking it out of place. But I just couldn't help it.

Can't put them back now.

Cat out of the bag.

Jack out of the box.

Escaped words.

The first time I did this, my daughter looked at me quizzically, laughing. She speaks with a Fife accent, and Scots words are natural in her speech. My husband, despite having lived in Scotland for most of his life, still speaks the English of the South East, and has an ingrained habit of correcting my pronunciation. They were both puzzled the first time I blurted out these oddities. Suddenly I'd become someone else. Unfamiliar.

Out of context...

Senget.

From somewhere else.

The next time, I only just managed to squeak back what I'd have said but felt the very force and rush of these lexemes, phonemes, morphemes, words, modifiers and clauses that just wanted out of my mouth. As if they had a life all of their own and jumping with other cultures that shouldn't be there. Stranger-danger words?

My family are used to them now, but I try hard to leave them at home. Because they show you up, don't they? These nouns and verbs that don't blend in; they speak of an unfamiliar time and place –

Out of kilter.

Interloper, Foreigner.

Incomer.

– another story.

Once, as a student hitch-hiking through the Midlands, a blind man at a youth hostel said to me in surprise over biscuits and a mug of tea, I can't tell that you aren't English from the way you talk... but just occasionally, there's something odd in the way you pronounce words.

I know what you mean, I could have answered him. I have words that might take you into other worlds, too. I have a Kurutau, a Wairarapa. I could throw these your way as well:

Togs.

Chippies.

Jandals

I could say these to that same blind man, I have words maybe not quite so strange, but there's something awry about the sound of them, their tone, their sense...

'That's great, honey' I wrote once in a novel, and my editor said, 'Could we just change that to sweetie? Honey...It sounds, you know... It's not British.'

Internalised colonial legacies you might say. I was born in a country on the brink of political independence but grew up speaking the English learnt in a good mission school for girls. That compulsion to speak correctly and well wasn't the product of arguments put across to convince; they were... simply just the way it was. I felt it as something not outside of me, but as a calling.

Indeed, in Singapore, there have been periodic and much publicised campaigns to combat colloquial vernaculars:

Make Good English Stick.
 Speak Up, Speak Out.
 Impress. Inspire. Intoxicate.

'Of course, 'I said, and changed 'honey' to 'sweetie'. I didn't even think about it at the time. 'Any other words I need to change?'

My school's aims for academic excellence meant that Singlish – though in the 1960s it wasn't graced with that name as yet – was a bastardized language. A sub-standard creole, associated with Chinese-speaking local school children at best and, at worst, linked with inarticulate, uneducated folk who just didn't know, and couldn't do better. Language marked you, corralled you into graded pens, some more 'tip top' than others. At school, I learnt quickly – and unthinkingly – how to get on, to say yes as a good citizen, and through acceptance and mastery of education and its ritualised practices, to rise up the ranks. Quite literally, these institutions made me, *authorised* me.

In 1960s New Zealand my family would tell me, 'Remember where you come from, really come from – Scotland, Britain. That's where you belong.' Stuffing my head with the stories of 'home' as we lived our lives on the other side of the world in out-of-time zones and seasons, filling my head with other words and places: heather, mists and dreich. On marched those certainties, fashioning and shaping identity, turning lakes into lochs, hills into braes. No wonder my books are riddled through with geographies neither here nor there, and landscapes unnamed and un-marked. No wonder my stories are located in a somewhere that is actually a nowhere. About a place but not of it.

Either...
 And neither.

Remember too, how tea is not 'thick', it's 'strong'. For things that can be counted, don't use 'much' but 'many'.

Get It Right.
 Speak Well. Be Understood.

Not 'Yeah', but 'yes.' 'Yes please, and I do beg your pardon. ' Yes, please' and 'Excuse me. Of course!'

I can remember being pleased when praised for speaking well. And I have tried hard. I've practised. Yet even now some sounds don't ring true. A lifetime of anxieties linked to speaking and writing properly, of correcting essays, of teaching English Literature ('Wah, isn't it strange to have a foreigner teach English to the English', my friends had laughed), learning to pronounce words properly to mimic English sounds...

And now here I am, stuck in no man's land. I can't even speak Singlish when I'm in Singapore. At Changi airport, the taxi driver says, 'Where are you from? Have you come a long way?'

When I look at my writing on the page I hear another cadence underneath the sentences that I've put down. To me they appear as strange echoes of a tone and voice not apparent when drafting my stories, all scribbled sentences upon a blank sheet. Casting my eyes over my books now, they jump out: 'We could stay out all day if we wanted, poking sticks around the roots of trees for eels...' ¹ is one. 'There's someone come to town...and I never seen her before' ², another. And here, too, from the same title, 'Better make sure the old man was dressed OK. Shall I come through and give you a hand?' ³ These little phrases and fragments in novels I've written, stories I've been told that seem 'thick' with a new world life, with inflections that call up a very different sort of country to the one with lochs and heather and mists on the brae.

In Scotland, more and more Singlish has recently issued out of my mouth, almost beyond control. 'When I'm demented', I joke to my family, 'you won't be able to understand a word I say. You'll have to google it. Get an app to translate.' Secretly, I wonder if I'd turn into one of those old women who mumble under their breath, a truculent old bag who won't keep quiet, who refuses to be told what to do and say, embarrassing others with peculiar phrases and mixed-up idioms – ranging around the place, muttering gleefully words in the world that don't adapt and won't slot into place?

'When you say those words is it that you feel their fit – that no other English words comes near enough?' Alex, my speech-therapist friend asks me, as we drink tea in her large, summery garden. 'That's the product of learning in a real-world context, and not simply as some abstract process.'

For sure, it's odd how these strange bits of vocabulary, twists of syntax seem to have settled in. Like relatives who have overstayed their welcome, they sit there stubbornly and remind me of who I was, what I might have been, who I am. I want to nod companionably, but am just not quite sure how to make room for them. Should I let in these moments of shift and shock to stop readers taking these published stories as if all are known and familiar? No wonder I couldn't get a single New Zealand magazine to publish my stories when I was setting out as a writer. I couldn't begin to see back then how words might morph and change, turn home inside out. Those magazines wanted a literature of home truths, a fiction of belonging. They wanted nationhood, certainty. Everyone in this

¹ *** (London: Faber and Faber, 1994)

² *** (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), p.40.

³ *** p. 109.

together. 'This isn't a New Zealand story' one magazine editor wrote to me when I was nineteen. 'I don't know what it is, but it's not New Zealand...'

It was as if all that writing about my Scottish family and all those phrases and pronunciations that that gave us strange, watery, heathery versions of a country that wasn't where I was living then, but some kind of Highland outpost just down the road from Caithness, set us apart from the New Zealand as the rest of the country knew it.

'Where you from anyhow?' New Zealand kids in the landlocked Wairarapa used to say to us, pointing the orange sticks of their ice blocks in our faces in a manner both friendly and threatening. 'Eh? Where?'

Earlier I wrote 'my daughter looked at me quizzically'; that 'quizzically' says it all. That I might have been someone unfamiliar, segnet even. Look at where I am now, in this essay, as those unruly words return to unhouse me. They've transported me into a no man's land –

Where a blind man lifts his head to hear.

Where a daughter laughs.

Where an editor intervenes.

– and leaves me here, mid-page, mid-thought.

Of course the question, 'Where are you from anyhow? Eh, where?', is more judgement than enquiry. All my life in Britain, I've hedged and fudged my responses. I've said, 'well, I was born in Singapore but I've lived here all my life' or, in New Zealand I've answered, 'I was born here but my family are Scottish'. Yet all such responses I've come to realise are squirming acceptances, more or less, that at least some part of that assertion of unbelonging is true. This acknowledgement – the discovery that indeed I am who you say I am – is central to how language and rhetoric embed the capacity to divide and rule. Language enables us to take up forms of identity, to see ourselves represented exactly as in those words. Denise Riley understands such acts of rhetorical hailing as 'interpellation' in *The Words of Selves*⁴, as a mirror of words held up for me to see myself. The question, 'Where are you from anyhow? Eh, where?', occurs only in the now of its rhetorical hailing, but is internalised as something already there sparking that recognition. The now becomes the past where the person that I will become was one who was there all along. That zeroing in on my unbelonging by those New Zealand kids or, more recently, in the adverbial supplement, 'where do you come from originally', carries all the everyday force and 'machinations'⁵, Riley asserts, of interpellative language. Both questions and my responses show how the shared space of the sentence shapes who we think we

⁴ Denise Riley, *The Words of Selves* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 79-85.

⁵ Riley, p. 83.

are, working like a signpost – Stop! Go this way! Now this! Now this! – as I make my journey through this world.

In *Artefacts of Writing*⁶ Peter McDonald reminds us too that language is the place where subjectivity and identity are constructed – that not only might I be stopped by a censor of my own or someone else's making, but that I am also brought into belonging, into society, into a state, through linguistic and rhetorical acts. Language runs as networks and flows that render us as who we are even though we're not aware of it. Sensitising us to other rhythms and words in what he titles 'vagabond' literary texts, all displaying linguistic patchworks and neologisms not easily disciplined by or fenced in within 'Good English!', he shows the way language itself has always been managed by powerful forces intent on preserving the status quo. That force, armoured with all kinds of certainties, has always been on erecting walls. So James Joyce's masterpiece of rogue wordage and 'disincorporated' sentences had – and still has – the capacity to radically transform and disrupt. In *Finnegan's Wake*, McDonald reminds us, the rush of syntactical transmogrifications and wilful mispronunciations and verbages spill and spoil the well-spoken world. In my own moments of stop and start, and silence, brought upon by those wider campaigns to dam a flood of feral words, what chance had my 'jandal' and 'sepak' ever had?

Framed like this I see now how the intrusion of a different cadence to received pronunciation, the conventional English in one of my short stories, twists an ordinary English reading sensibility and makes agency and point of view into something that can't be taken for granted. Yeah, in fact – and I'm trying this out right now – yeah, yeah, for sure, such realisations trouble that frame! But these kinds of differences, too, I'm coming to see, more accurately – after years of reading – belong to the properties of words and language, not to speakers or subjects. By activating certain moments of shift and interruption, fiddling with the words, readers of my work must come inside and try and figure it out the story's strangeness. That way, the play of syntax and semantics themselves might come to colour and tint their own sense of a reading self.

Language acquisition and use mark exactly that conundrum of shared spaces that my daughter and you, my reader, inhabit, along with me. Language and identity are a bit like the puzzle of a Klein bottle: a closed loop of agency where the inside is also the outside. In fact, that puzzle of interiority and exteriority is blindingly apparent in that most private and personal of linguistic acts: the mystery of names and of naming – those quiet, private labels we give our children which they then inhabit and make their own, and hear sound aloud in the everyday. So it's not just not a case of my lost language claiming to articulate something that lies dormant. For there are other words, too, proper – and

⁶ Peter McDonald, *Artefacts of Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017)

improper – nouns and pronouns roaming across the page in all of our lives. I am thinking here about how speech and writing seemingly proceeds expressively out of our mouths, our pens and our keyboards, yet how that language use, too – all of it, I mean, not just my 'senget' and my 'honey' – is acquired from the outside and internalised through the logic of long practice, and idiosyncrasies framed by learnt social habits associated with belonging and with power, to shape a distinct, solid and stable self.

Perhaps that's part of the reason I want to write as two 'I's now, in my essaying. So that both can be at large on the borderland of expression and articulacy, more disruptive yet generous and expansive than when in singular form? An 'I' that is maybe two, or more even as you – a reader – read this sentence. It's exciting to see how, through sharing my first person pronoun 'I', letting one 'I' speak for another, interrupting and inserting and overwriting, not only may I dissolve the responsibilities of the first person – personality, history and agency all caught up together in the business of being a writer – but can also come to understand in the experience of writing in this the shared word expanse. That 'I' is the space made by a New Zealand-Scots woman as well as by a Singapore-Scots woman; and that therefore that same 'I' might be capacious enough, to let in a 'you' too.

There's way more room in the sentence when more than two 'I's are together in the space of this essay. More room in a new kind of language that marks and unmarks, enacts and disappears, every time I sit down to write or read:

I was born in New Zealand and have lived most of my real and imaginative life in Britain.

And –

I was born in Singapore and lived most of my real and intellectual life in Britain.

Certainly, I am learning, writing this, that I want to let the other words in. To stop and start. Shiok: to enjoy more and more the strangeness of them, moments in the text that rise up as bumps and swerves in a prose otherwise even and uninterrupted as it goes about its job of making sense – stalling and skewing meaning. The whiffs and traces of another world, marks on the page and sounds opening into other times and spaces, the 'alrights', and the 'ehs' create a knot, a tension, allowing for tentative, interesting, readings.

Because how can anything be so fixed and certain when it's jumping with Wairarapa and Paekaekaeriki and the deep, deep New Zealand rural cadences that echo through my memory, that I now hear with a kind of fresh recognition, and sense of celebration in the prose of writers like Patricia Grace and Dan Davin and Frank Sargeson? Those phrases from the past, flattened and full-stopped, sentences softened with uncertainties and self effacement, that are far removed

from the clear voiced, clipped authority of the private girls' school of my childhood, and traditionalist education with its debating and speech prizes and silver cups and Oxford and tutorials... All freighted with their own reasons for keeping words in their place.

Because -

Paekakariki.

AngMoPai.

What can you do with nouns and adjectives like that? And -

Jandals.

Kena

These smack of cultural backwaters, showing a mind muddled and backward-looking, was how I was brought up to think. And even as I write this essay, with everything I have read and thought, I am still anxious about right ways to write. Should a piece of intellectual endeavour stop and start like this, incorporating interpellations and memories, anecdotes and hesitations? What would the referees of the journal to which I'm submitting this essay say? That it can't be a significant intellectual pursuit because scholarly rigour has not been evidenced in a timeline of citations, each quotation charting carefully the provenance of ideas, each also lending metonymic intellectual credibility to the entire enterprise? And what about two women who write in first person, who want to engage in creative critique, eschewing the 'tone lock', scholarly 'etymologies' and sedimented conventions of disciplinary analysis for a more playful, yet equally serious, response? The question, as Stephen Benson and Clare Connors pose it in *Creative Criticism* is 'whether or not to accede to the workings of and institutionalised demand' for what counts as professionalised critical thinking.⁷ Michel Foucault once said there are the regimes of truth produced by discourses that regulate what is accepted and made to function as true, and 'techniques and procedures accorded value' and that these grant authority to 'those who are charged with saying what counts as true.'⁸ How does essaying, then, as a kind of questioning, uncertain heuristic activity fit within the regime of academic production? Essaying not as a reflection of an established system of knowledge but as a venturing forth, a weighing, a trying out, a sampling and a sounding out; for as Robert Atwan puts it, essay writing need not be those 'airtight arguments

⁷ Stephen Benson and Clare Connors ed, 'Introduction' in *Creative Criticism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), pp.10.

⁸ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed by Colin Gordon (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 180), p. 131.

of conclusive treatises'.⁹ So yeah, thinking, trying out, writing differently, and wondering how my words might be received, even when I know, in my own alternative, fuzzy and messy way, the gravity of my intellectual engagement. Wondering here in this essay how my words out of kilter, still living revenants, from other times and countries, might also muck up an authoritative voice professing expertise and precision. There's Kent turning to King Lear and remarking, 'But you have that in your countenance which I would fain call master'. Might I risk acting the joyful trickster to the King then in this drama of rhetoric? Might such rogue words, my attentiveness to sound and cadence, its playful casting, cloud...?

For I want to let loose such vibrations into the grand drama of academic discoursing, with their paragraphs of elegant academic prose; I write hoping to unsettle, emptying out into ellipses and chunks of white space stable, if sometimes formulated and formulaic, thinking. To insert questions between sections of my written work – show words not sufficing, dispersing in different directions, even when I have made it my whole life to have words suffice, and have been taught not to trick but to run along a straight track all the way to the end. So what will the journals make of all this? My publishers? My gatekeepers of scholarly capital?

Sometimes she might make 'sharper analytical points', suggested one journal referee not unkindly, and her writing 'must explore in greater detail the extensively researched notions that language remains contingent, multivalent, invested, and political'.

'Sometimes it's as if', one reviewer wrote of my short stories, 'she's not writing in English at all... but translating'...

Troubled by my strange Singlish eruptions, I asked Alex again for her professional opinion. I wanted to know if she knew of similar incidents in her work as a speech therapist. She joked, 'Maybe you've have something akin to having a stroke', and told me a story of a bilingual speaker in China who one day woke up from a seizure having forgotten her mother tongue and speaking fluent English, a learnt second language. But none of her Chinese family understood what she was saying. Bilingual aphasia or pathological mixing and switching due to brain damage, Alex said. 'But you haven't had a stroke have you?', she laughed. With increasing alarm, I read from a scientific paper, that 'Communicative competence for normal bilingual individuals entails an ability to adapt language

⁹ Robert Atwan, 'Notes towards a definition of an Essay', *River Teeth: A Journal of Nonfiction Narrative* 14(1), 2012, p. 110. See also Paul Heilker, *The Essay: Theory and Pedagogy for an Active Form* (Urbana, Illinois: 1996); 'Twenty Years In: An Essay in Two Parts', *College Composition and Communication* 58(2), 2006, pp.182-212; Benson and Connors eds, 'Introduction', pp. 1-47.

use in accordance with... [an] interlocutor.... Brain damage may disrupt this online actualisation of cognitive abilities, leading to unintentional switching...'¹⁰

So then, perhaps, my inappropriate use of Singlish in Scotland might be a sign of a kind of aphasia even though I don't think I have had a stroke? Trouble is, as if someone rewired my circuits, the words that I've suppressed for most of my life now feel so right. My daughter shouts them gleefully as if they were childish, nonsensical words surfacing only in play.

When Sian was two and just getting to grips with learning words, she used some made-up words and phrases which I, even as her mother, took some time to learn. 'Seamao' was the easy one; she said those words in rituals of leave-taking at the childminder's, and I took it to mean see you or see you again. Her toy badger was called 'Budjiew', and because it didn't sound a world away from 'badger', I also came to recognise it very quickly. Both my husband and I laugh about 'Budjiew' because the word now names the toy rather than the mammal. But 'sajii' puzzled us for a quite while as it didn't sound remotely like the thing itself. The word uttered was always a scrawny cry accompanied by a small forefinger extended. Even now, I don't know how to spell that word; I thought at first might it have been 'Sarjid', its end-stopped 'd' sound, soft not hard, and its 'r' not rolling, but almost silent, like 'Sajii'. 'Sarjid' or 'Sajii' was always accompanied by the expressive bodily excitement of an exclamation mark. So for a quite a while that 'sound in her mind', as Wallace Stevens once put it, defeated us.

Children's writing has its own history of neologisms, many of which have now made it into the literary canon; 'runcible', 'frobscottle', 'jiggered', 'jumbly' or 'heffalumps' still give us pleasure as adults. Sheer emotive joy as we shape our mouths to pronounce those words or delight as our mind lights up with recognition when these sounds strike the ear. But there's something else going on here too, more than just an aural pleasure, that shows up a particular truth about creativity. It's to do with our understanding of ourselves – a widening of sensibility, an uncoupling of self from the stiff strictures of sense and sensibility – when we let in these strange words of ours. In his poem 'Learning to Talk', Jim Dodge writes about his child's mispronunciations giving something vital to the world that standard English robs it of:

Whenever Jason said 'beeber' for 'beaver'
or 'skirl' for 'squirrel'
I secretly loved it.
They're better words:

¹⁰ Fred Geneese, 'Portrait of a Bilingual Child' in *Portraits of the L2 User*, edited by Vivian Cook (Clevedon, New York & Ontario: Multilingual Matters, 2002), pp.167-198.

The busy beeper beeping around;
the grey squirrels' tail
like a skirl of smoke along a maple branch.¹¹

'So much beauty is lost to understanding' is how Dodge finishes the poem, when Jason has learnt to pronounce words 'correctly'.

In a research paper on speech development, I read that small children create words to 'fill lexical gaps in their incomplete and still developing vocabulary', finding invented 'appropriate form[s]' to express their 'intended meaning' because their 'adult vocabulary' is not fully mature as yet. Despite associating these neologisms with 'lexical creativity', 'playfulness' and 'emotionality', adult language acquisition is still seen as normative, and sustained transgressions other than in a development phase, pathological... in need of explanation.¹² This seems logical, for what is the use of a secret language if no one else understands it? Language's function, after all, must be communication. And yet, I think... I think... these other forms of writing, less fixated on certainties and correct usage, also communicate.

In 'Childish', the closing chapter of *Landmarks*, Robert MacFarlane makes a plea for wonderment, and for preserving the metaphoric 'intricacies', the encrypted language of young children's speech, with their 'coined toponyms and nouns', that contain 'many more terms than we have perceptions to translate them'.¹³ These are words that speak to specific ways of inhabiting the landscape; words that must be said with bodily gesture and effort; words that teach us how to see. In his account, the words children use to name and explore such as 'snap-land' or 'honeyfurs' are ways of mark-making, melding the imaginative with the physical world as a 'single alloy'. And while Macfarlane does not say it explicitly, these words are also poetic, beholden, too, to sound. If, in growing up, as he bemoans, 'Childish' has fallen away, replaced by 'the impoverished dialect of adult speech'¹⁴, certain words do remain as residues, shapely shadows hidden in remote rooms and cul-de-sacs in our minds that occasionally flash up uninvited. Writing this, I suddenly remember, 'dagget', a shared childhood alliterative joke about dogs, and 'chumping away', a neologism coined for my young daughter's

¹¹ Jim Dodge, 'Learning to Talk', *Rain on the River* (New York: Grove, 2002). Also available: <<https://groveatlantic.com/book/rain-on-the-river/>> [accessed 11.03.2019].

¹² Eleni Motsiou, 'Lexical innovations (neologisms) in children's speech', *Contrastive Linguistics* 2, 2012, 22-31.

¹³ Robert MacFarlane, *Landmarks* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2015), 326, 317.

¹⁴ MacFarlane, p. 317.

babble. Chumpy, Chumpy, Chumpy, I had shouted, chasing a eight-year old girl up the stairs. Now a grown-up woman, she converses with me and her adult friends as though that other language never existed. So much beauty, so many words... lost to understanding.

Words are sounds, not simply semantic containers all neatly lined up in sequence. For there may be other meanings conveyed by tone, cadence in the very heartbeats of words. My second daughter, as an infant, talked incessantly in her own made-up language, a torrent of emphatic consonants and fast-tripping vowels, all earnestly conveying intention, volition... 'Listen to me' all those sentences said. Her big-sister's insults took the form of peering closely at her face and saying with great emphasis, 'Blah, Blah, Blah yourself.... Kaaaaafff...rin!', as though her baby speech was puzzling when in fact mostly everything said was understood. So, yes, 'blah, blah, blah' isn't simply blah, blah, blah. Each word, each sound had an insistence, a present tense 'here-ness', immanent and fully realised in the moment of its speaking and distinct from conceptual understanding based on predictable, clear-headed grammatical parts of speech. When I make fiction I think about that; how, for me, sound does not lag behind meaning but that meaning is contained *within* the sound. At the time of writing, of reading, of saying, not only are there landmarks then, of image and of description, but 'sound marks' is what I am getting at here, words testifying as to how our minds are as joyfully attuned to the ear as to sense. The arachnophobia of 'Sajii', the quiet violence coiled in an 'Eh?'

Is how it feels... Is.

'Pomogranote' is how my elder daughter spells the fruit in a poem she'd recently written about Persephone. It strikes me now that all those round 'o' sounds signal musical notes as well as the mythic, maternal signifiers, the mother's 'o's in open-mouthed keening at her daughter's disappearance. Why not the fulsomeness of the ripe flesh and its spilling myriad of rounded seeds signalled phonetically, deliciously, by pom-o-gran-ote? Might not the very idea of making sense be a making, too, of sound? A made-up thing of letters that's also made in the mouth?

O - O - O.

So.

As I come towards the end of these thoughts...

I think now, both the ear and the eye might let in all sorts of the different sounds and visions of experiences in the world. Finding in this essay sonic, linguistic revenants from my children's and my childhood, from countries with their drawn boundaries and histories, imagined and real, lost rhythms and sentence structures that have come back to take their place among the acclimatised sentences and accents... For look! Though buried all this time, here they are... The saji and the shiok, the orange ice-block stained sentences of the kids up North with their bare feet and dirt on their knees; the blur of my mood beyond the AngMohPia; the thick tea that was drunk in the classroom, the playgrounds and sunlit pasts full of words, phrases, sentences that are still in my mind... 'Hey girlie! I'm gonna tell on you!'

Tell on me, then, I want to say now. Identify me, call me out to those other, more 'proper' conventional compositions. Let the sounds ring out and come over to play.

Eh? You mean it?

Yeah! Alamak! Be senget lah.

For they form a different key signature, these words that run to the rhythm of another time, they punch my essay with other beats. All the kaisus, sepaks and kenas, tuckers and kais... they mix Standard English up, they unsettle scholarly ways of writing. No revolutionary acts to erode class or racial differences, but in leaping and prance in the interstices between conventional sentences, they play out to readers in new involving ways. An essay, an adventure that we make here on the page, that reads to write, that writes to think, and listens in the cadence of words betwixt and between, to read and write again... Such essaying might allow for both sound and meaning, writing and reading, to live both separately and together on the line, known features of syntax and vocabulary dancing contrapuntally to the great gaps and fissures that also open out on the page. So that –

in the here and the there of the language used in this essay,

in the present

and the past,

in this word

and in that -

meaning

and uncertainty

might come together in the writing

that I make...

And that I make....

So I am essaying together:

As both,

'I' and 'I',

as reader and writer,

either and neither.

In lost languages – found voices – speaking, asking to be heard.